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AUTHOR Hayes, Julie

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ABSTRACT

Although an Australian educator had taught isolated aspects of functional grammar for a number of years, she felt that she had not put enough energy into building field (topic) knowledge. With the unit featured in this PEN Digest she aims to focus on building a quite extensive knowledge of the topic--snakes. According to the Digest, the educator told her primary grade students that the class members were going to be herpetologists, studying and writing about snakes; at every appropriate opportunity, she compared the language of reports with the language of narratives and recounts. The Digest describes the process of gathering information, discusses the "tenor" of the relationship between reporter and audience, provides students' work samples, offers student reflections, and presents findings. (NKA)

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PRIMARY ENGLISH TEACHING ASSOCIATION PETA

Planning and teaching report-writing

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JULIE HAYES

Information reports can only convey authority when their writers truly know the territory, or 'field', that they are communicating. This PEN recounts the progress of a group of early-years students who became experts on the slippery subject of snakes.

For a number of years I'd taught isolated aspects of functional grammar. I'd looked at conjunctions; at participants, processes and circumstances; at nominal groups; at modality; at reference. Some of this work had been part of the study of genre, but not all. In fact, I had never strategically planned a unit of work using a functional framework.

When I'd taught report-writing in the past, I'd felt that I hadn't put enough energy into building field (topic) knowledge. I'd taught the *structure* of reports rather well, I think, but I hadn't ensured that the students knew enough about the topic to write effectively. So, with this unit of work, I aimed to focus on building a quite extensive knowledge of the topic — snakes.

I particularly wanted the students to write from an expert's point of view. At the outset, I told them that we were going to be herpetologists, studying and writing about snakes. As we looked closely at the language used in reports about snakes, I referred to the features that made the authors appear to be experts. At every appropriate opportunity, I compared the language of reports with the language of narratives and recounts. The students had written many narratives and recounts throughout the year, and were therefore able to make good sense of these comparisons.

The process

This unit was done in the final term with a combined Year 1/2 class. The 25 students included 16 girls. Most of the students were from relatively affluent backgrounds. Six spoke a language other than English at home; three came from identified low-income families.

The school-wide focus for the year had been recount-writing, and the students were very familiar with that genre. They had also written procedures and narratives throughout the year, but not reports. In the preceding months I'd done some work with this class on processes (verbs), participants (nouns) and circumstances (adverbial and adjectival phrases). Some students could identify these elements in simple clauses; others had difficulty.

My teaching role at this time was to provide release for class teachers on a flexible timetable. To ensure the momentum of topic learning, the class teacher taught several of the lessons aimed at building field knowledge. We generally managed to dedicate two, sometimes three, 90-minute lessons per week to our snake study.

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Gathering information

To kick off our study, I asked the students to record everything they already knew about snakes. They were told to write reports, but the emphasis was not on the word 'report' but on writing as much information as they could.

I ensured that a wide range of printed texts — books and posters — was available for students to read, both as part of our unit lessons and as free-choice reading. Before we began taking notes, we brainstormed some possible headings under which we might record the information we found. We checked library books to see if we had omitted any headings that might be useful. The notion of organising notes under these headings was new to most of the students. In fact, the practice of 'taking notes' was, by and large, new in itself.

I chose to look in some depth at sections of *Dangerous Australian Snakes* (Keyt, 1998). I thought this book was a good example of the report genre, and a good challenge for Year 1s and 2s because of its range of information, technical language and complexity of grammar.

We analysed a page from this book during the first part of most lessons. I displayed the text on an overhead projector so that we could read it together. Among other things, I:

- asked the students to read and reread sections of the text
- asked comprehension questions to draw out information about snakes
- asked students to identify technical vocabulary and to make a glossary of those words using our own definitions
- led discussion of words like 'some', 'most' and 'all'
- supported the class to construct notes for each paragraph, which they later copied into their own books
- asked questions that focused students' attention on the type of language used in the report; for example:
  - What word describes the snake's skin?
  - What word did the author use to describe the snake's movement?
  - What clause tells where the snake lives?
  - How has the author begun these two sentences? (Sentences in reports often begin with general participants, e.g. 'Most snakes' or reference words, e.g. 'They'.)
  - What does 'This' refer to in the sentence 'This is repeated until the prey is past its jaws'?

I also showed a video on reptiles. I believe that videos are excellent texts for developing field knowledge. Younger children, in particular, often learn effectively by hearing and seeing new information simultaneously. It's also impossible for students to copy slabs of text mindlessly.

As we viewed each section of the video, students suggested phrases that we should use to record the most important facts. This was an opportunity to teach the skills of note-taking — in particular, writing very brief notes using content words only. I encouraged the more confident students to write their own versions of each note if they chose not to use the jointly constructed version.

As they developed their topic knowledge, the students also created some snake artwork, browsed through library books on snakes, handled snake and snake-egg specimens, and listened to children's and adults' recounts of experiences with snakes.

Tenor

The relationship between author and audience determines the tenor of any text. To this point, the students were more familiar with the tenor commonly found in recounts and stories. Authors essentially approach these genres with the intention to captivate their audiences and compel them towards a conclusion; audiences, on the other hand, come to these genres with expectations of emotional engagement, enjoyment and satisfaction. There is a quality of 'co-conspiracy' as author and audience come together to live through an experience. This relationship is quite different from that between the reporter and her/his audience. To illustrate the difference, I changed the formal, scientific language from *Dangerous Australian Snakes* to the less formal, non-scientific language that might be found in narratives and recounts. After providing a number of oral examples, I presented the students with a set of sentences, which I asked them to cut out and classify into one of two categories: report or recount/narrative.

My snake has great scales. See — that's why he doesn't burn easily in the sun.

The scales on the skin of a snake help to protect it from the hot sun.

There are 32 kinds of sea snakes in Australian waters.

There are heaps of sea snakes. I reckon there are about 32 types in Australia.

I love the inland taipan because it's the most poisonous snake in Australia.

The inland taipan is Australia's most venomous snake.

You won't believe that some snakes lay their eggs in yucky rotten old plants. This is supposed to keep them warm until they hatch.

Some snakes lay their eggs in old plants. As the plants rot, they give out warmth, which helps the eggs to hatch.

This activity was intended to encourage the students to think about words that are personal and informal, as against words that are technical and impersonal — words that seem to create more 'distance' between the author and the audience. Categorising these sentences produced lively discussion. Most students located their sentences in the appropriate category.

Work samples

I've chosen seven typical examples of students' work to demonstrate the progress they made over the four- to five-week period of this unit of work. The students selected represent the middle performance range for this class. I've corrected spelling, capitalisation and possession mistakes so that the information can be more clearly appreciated. (Spelling wasn't a focus of this unit, although the class teacher worked consistently through the year on this aspect of writing.) I some cases, I've amended punctuation to make the writing easier to read. I've replicated the students' paragraphing in all cases.

Sample 1
Beginning of term

Tom (Year 2 boy)

Some snakes are deadly.

Juanita (Year 2 girl)

Snakes shed their skin at a reasonable time.

Some snakes eat eggs.

Sample 2
4 weeks later

All snakes are cold blooded just like every other reptile.

Snakes have detachable jaw muscles to swallow their prey.

Snakes feel vibrations so they know that something is coming.

Pythons squeeze their prey until it suffocates. Snakes can camouflage so it is a little bit easier to catch the prey. When snakes have just eaten they only have a little venom.

Snakes are reptiles. Some snakes have venomous fangs. Venom is poison.

Sample 1 continued

Josh (Year 2 boy)

Some snakes eat lizards' eggs. There is a kind of snake that has two heads. Snakes are like legless lizards. Some snakes can get as wide as a road and 50 m long.

Melanie (Year 1 girl)

Snakes eat small animals like rats. They live in long grass and they can sting people.

Zoe (Year 2 girl)

Snakes are found in the grass. Snakes are brown and black. Snakes eat eggs.

Sample 2 continued

Reptiles were the first animals to lay eggs. Snakes' eggs have a leathery shell. The eggs come out of the snake's tummy.

Snakes' fangs are hollow so the poison can come down.

The rib has muscles on each side to help the snake to move.

Snakes eat their food whole. Once they have eaten their food they have to stay still to help them to digest their food.

Snakes use their tongue to smell.

Some snakes squeeze their prey.

Snakes use their tongues to smell.

All snakes shed their skin. Mother snakes do not usually stay to hatch their eggs. Sidewinders touch only two parts of their body. The male touches the female's body with his tongue to smell whether she is ready to mate. The snakes wrap their bodies around each other. Most snakes lay about 20 eggs in a nest.

To hatch out of the egg, they have a small egg tooth that falls off after a while.

The sunbeam snake is the only species in its family.

Snakes can digest everything except hair and feathers, even bones.

Snakes sleep through winter in parts of Australia.

Over half of Australia's snakes are venomous.

Snakes are reptiles they kill their prey by their fangs.

But pythons squeeze their prey to death.

Snakes smell with their tongue and they can not blink. Some snakes have eggs.

Some snakes have outer ears. Some species lay about 100 eggs.

Red yellow and black snakes are often dangerous.

And they feel vibrations coming and they usually eat rats.

They eat their prey in one gulp.

Snakes use their tongues to smell. Snakes are cold blooded like many other reptiles.

They have been on earth for 120 million years.

Snakes have an egg tooth to break the shell open the egg when it is time to come out of its shell it breaks it open with its special egg tooth.

The snakes have different styles to get around the place.

Some snakes have sacs of venom. Snakes have different ways of mating. Snakes are meat eaters. Most snakes live in the desert. Snakes are on their own. Some snakes have bad tempers. Snakes shed their skin when it gets too big.

Sample 1 continued

Jack (Year 2 boy)

Some snakes have deadly venom and others don't have any venom at all.

A snake diet would only be of meat.

Sam (Year 2 boy)

Some snakes are poisonous.

Some have fangs.

Some are camouflaged.

Sample 2 continued

All reptiles are cold blooded and have scales. Snakes have been on earth for 12 million years.

Some snakes squeeze their prey and other snakes poison prey. Some snakes have front fangs and other snakes have far fangs.

Sidewinder only touches the ground with two parts. Snakes can swim and climb well.

Snakes have no eyelids.

Most snakes lay eggs but some snakes have live young. Reptiles are the first animals to lay eggs.

Snakes get their strength from their muscles on their ribs.

Snakes shed their skin in one piece turning it inside out as they wriggle out.

Some snakes squeeze prey and other snakes use venom. And snakes unhook their jaw when they want to eat food and after they have eaten the food they do a yawn that puts their jaw back into place.

In Australia there are seven groups and in the world there is 12 groups.

Snakes have two holes one is to go to the toilet and the other is for its babies. Some snakes after their babies have hatch they leave them. And other snakes after they have just come out of the mother she leaves them.

Student reflections

About two weeks after we wrote the snake reports, I interviewed the students whose work is included in this summary. We talked informally in a group and, after some preliminary chat about the whole unit of work, I asked a number of questions. The first was intended to find out which learning activities they thought helped them to learn about snakes — to gain knowledge of the field.

The reports you wrote were excellent. What learning activities helped you the most to find out about snakes?

Reading books — using the overhead and our own reading.

The video and by listening and looking.

Posters.

Making notes.

I was very interested to find out how students thought they learned the technical, objective language of reports — a major focus of my teaching.

When you wrote your reports you used language that was different form the language you use in recounts and stories. What learning activities helped you to learn about the language of reports?

Reading the information books and videos.

The overhead … it showed the glossary words in bold.

Handling the snakes.

Seeing the video.

Looking in books.

Doing the sheet to find which one [sentence] was for reports.

What do you know about the language of reports?

You can't use names like Tom.

Can't say 'our snake's going to catch a rat'.

There's no talking [direct speech].

You have to use scientific words like 'prey' and 'venom'.

What do you know about the organisation of reports?

You put spaces between each subject.

You get all the things together like in a glossary and you put them into topics.

They put all the information they've got into the report.

Start with a heading.

Scientists don't remember it all. They write it down.

You put spaces between different subjects.

After you do a heading, you leave a space then you do another heading and keep going like that.

Findings

I was pleased that the students identified all of the activities I'd planned for them when they considered how they'd learned about snakes. A number of students continued their research after they'd written their final reports.

The students' reports show:

- a huge increase in field knowledge — along with a significant decrease in misinformation about snakes
- a good command of technical/scientific language
- a clear understanding of when to use 'snakes', 'all snakes' or 'some snakes'
- good use of timeless present tense
- some obvious attempts at organising information into paragraphs.

I spent very little time on the latter aspect. Consequently, a number or reports lacked an appropriate title, or started with a classification. The information tended to be randomly presented and not clustered into topics. The reports did not elaborate on facts, affecting their flow. These are all issues that could be addressed in rewrites or in subsequent work on reports.

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About the author

Julie Hayes is principal of Cowandilla Primary School in Adelaide. She has a long career as a teacher of students who use English as a second language.

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